

destroyers

by
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My current sculptural practice focuses upon the repurposing of vernacular objects and material as well as research into the visual culture of trans-national institutions, particularly those with alarming track records in the problematic realm of military interventionism. Using this framework of inquiry, I devise and execute my constructions to animate themes within and tangent to their physical objecthood. The selection of process and materials is in the service of developing visually credible simulacra that may properly contextualize the allegorical content of the work.

In this, the companion text to the suite of sculpture entitled “destroyers,” I take the opportunity to explore the conceptual and ideological underpinnings of the work. I attempt to sketch the frame of mind that gave rise to this thesis statement, to outline the methodology of my studio practice, and finally to describe how I arrived at resolution.

On July 3, 1988, Iran Air Flight 655 was shot down by the *USS Vincennes* over the Strait of Hormuz, killing all 290 aboard. Vice-President George H. W. Bush responded to the incident stating, "I'll never apologize for the United States of America. Ever. I don't care what the facts are." This coming from a man whose public image as a nerdy, pragmatic blue-blood would be caricaturized by Dana Carvey on *Saturday Night Live*. Superficially the boring career bureaucrat, the first Bush had the capacity to be just as ruthless as every other head of state, before or since. Wimp on the outside, destroyer on the inside; it goes with the territory.

One night not very long ago I found myself entranced for hours with the searchable image database for unexploded ordnance (UXO) published on a humanitarian organization's website. The images are a public resource to aid in the identification of such materials in countries far less fortunate than ours that must deal with the immediate consequences of modern warfare. In an uncomfortable twist of irony, I found the devices themselves very appealing for their design—prim little compact volumes and tantalizing widgets protruding here and there, and subdued colors, with perhaps a sporty stripe of bright red or yellow or blue across an important axis, adorning dimensions that have the rightness of visual composition that could only come from having to answer to the wiles of physics. I was transported to cartoon Christmas specials in which garish aggregations of shapes individually identifiable only as some abstracted notion of “toy” came tumbling out of jolly old Santa's bag.

Therein lies the major theme of peril that is as real as it is hidden. The UXO appears rather quaint on its own, save for its ability to enchant the armchair design wonk, yet words cannot do justice to the injustice of the destructive, tragic power that lurks there, incased in metal and plastic. Even though a genuine aesthetic appeal had me clicking away downloading images and choosing favorites in the safety of my studio, the disconnect was inescapable--these visual confections kill and maim in other parts of the world. The cluster bomblets and landmines that have been scattered indiscriminately by our military and our NATO allies in places like Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, now Libya, and soon Syria look for all the world like some

boring old toy that, though hardly a Nintendo DS, might still be good to toss around with one's (soon-to-be late?) friends.

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Though it was two years before I arrived at the need to suggest the physical mundanity of the institution in order to animate its sinister workings, the means by which to do so partially revealed themselves in a fittingly unassuming way. The body of work that would eventually carry the title of “destroyers” most likely had its genesis in the fall of 2008. In the corridor of Carruth-O’Leary Hall, which houses the Department of Human Resources and the Office of the Comptroller at the University of Kansas, I had a minor aesthetic epiphany: “bureaucracy” was a color, shape, and smell. Fittingly, I filed that notion away.

The hanging (and because of unfounded concern over it falling, the most talked-about) piece from this suite of sculptures began life as a filing cabinet that, like many institutional items, was tucked anonymously in the corner of a room. Lightly used, completely ignored, the object by itself struck me as a metaphor of the average citizen’s dispensation when it comes the actions of this government abroad. To prepare the cabinet for its new role, its insides were pulled out, ball bearings extracted, superfluous hardware removed to leave just the shell with its iconic features: brushed steel handle, 2”x3” frame that once held a label, two large square faces of drawers set into the rectilinear form. Next, the monolith was fragmented, and individual planes worked with the sheet metal brake, hammer, and stake, becoming the seeds of new volumes that exhibit an idiosyncratic formal vocabulary removed from the physical strictures of the original mass-produced object. From these building blocks I remade the original as though the initial planes of fragmentation were points of articulation and could allow for a more effusive, visually dynamic arrangement.

With the filing cabinet now “animated,” the inevitable gaps (literally) in the composition demanded a different practice, one that would take into consideration themes developing tangent to physical objecthood. Asking a mundane object to exhibit anthropomorphizing

gesture strains credibility here in the age of Transformers, and so the allegory that ultimately would give life to the work was carefully constructed using cues from the realities to which the sculpture alludes. After all, addition of the proper flourish to the existing form makes the difference between pineapple and hand grenade. Suspended roughly at shoulder level, “destroyers III” inhabits an impersonal space and has analogs in the unmanned hardware used by the military and the intelligence community. I included elements reminiscent of rocket warheads and air intakes to suggest the means of belligerent action (Democrats bomb, Republicans invade) carried out under a guise of popular mandate that is cynically transparent.

An acquaintance from high school and newly minted MFA from RISD described “destroyers” as “[John] Chamberlain meets [Lee] Bontecou with some Tatooine moisture evaporator [Star Wars reference] thrown in for good measure.” Though the part of me that wrongly believes in hermetic originality was slightly chafed, I cannot think of a better characterization of the lineage to which the work owes a great deal. “III” is primarily a large, hollow, boxy volume that utilizes a radial fragmentation. The illusion of dynamic sculptural mass wrung from discarded sheet metal and the patchwork, sci-fi menace of jagged edges and sooty distress draw influence from Chamberlain and Bontecou, respectively. The palette of satin blacks and grays is warmed slightly by the anemic ochre of what used to be library shelving. The seams between panels are fitted but incomplete and the shadow creeping out from between tack welds becomes line that describes form. In a departure from the conventional wisdom of the Richard Hunt-influenced school of metal fabrication that I came up through, the welds have been left as is, clearly visible and making no attempt to pass the work off as monolithic. They glint against the surrounding deep shadow, paint charred by the welder’s arc, in a regular cadence that suggests the rivets on aircraft skin. Many openings invite the mind while thwarting the eye, only darkness is to be seen between cracks or beyond a grate.

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The title “destroyers” has much more to do with characterizing an American gaze than it does with describing the work. There is a glib detachment laced with tacit approval embodied by the deliberately all-lower-case font that spells out such a declarative word. Among the perpetual non-burdens of the first-world consumer is the reconciliation of social conscience with an enculturated taste for cheap thrills driven by an entertainment industry that increasingly finds itself unfettered by taboo. Political activist and writer Arundhati Roy observes:

“Crisis reportage in the 21st century has evolved into an independent discipline—almost a science. The money, the technology, and the orchestrated mass hysteria that goes into crisis reporting has a curious effect. It isolates the crisis, unmoors it from the particularities of the history, the geography, and the culture that produced it...We have entered the era of crisis as a consumer item, crisis as spectacle, as theater. (Roy 2004:6-7)”

Footage of air strikes is shown so casually and matter-of-factly that we scarcely make the distinction between Hollywood and United States Air Force. There are no screams in our satellite footage—only flashes of light around a fuzzy targeting reticule.

Hard as it may be for the empathetic progressive to admit, part of us loves the explosions. This inner puerility may think “destroyers” just sounds cool, and I feel it must be acknowledged by a body of work that aspires to say something of the cultural moment in which it was made. Contemporary usage of the word in the United States is more likely to take an ironic tack (odor DESTROYERS slipped harmlessly into shoes and the like) than to describe something that razes our precious things. This points to a semantic dissonance that arises between this country and those we have antagonized over the years; “destroy” means a different thing in Sarajevo than it does in Sacramento.

A destroyer is what we might see if the uneasy combination of sensationalism and

theatrical gravitas of the evening news could animate the physical objecthood of the institutions that cause the news in the first place. Ultimately, the unifying context of what constitutes “destroyers” is allusion to grave iniquities that is mimetically blithe in its delivery. The droll countenance of the work and the detachment of its taxonomy seek to reflect the gaze that is constructed by popular culture.

Since every piece in the “destroyers” suite is, in fact, a destroyer, I felt conflicted in isolating the works with individual titles, especially given my predilection of following whimsy when it comes to concocting names. I tend to have a very convivial relationship with my sculptures as they are in progress and as a result the titles sometimes sound like inside jokes or possess a contrived folksiness that is profoundly annoying, the latter of which nearly every abstract sculptor is guilty of. The current configuration of “destroyers (roman numeral)” is directly drawn from a naming scheme I particularly admire in contemporary art, that of Belgian sculptor Peter Buggenhout. He maintains suites of work that each utilize different media, themes, and consist of multiple works bearing a single title. “Blind Leading the Blind” are dust sculptures, “Eskimo Blues” is a series of assemblages stretched-over with cow stomach. “destroyers I-III” sits comfortably for now.

By trial and mostly error, I know enough to avoid doing things that will lead me to resent my audience, so I can be very selective about what I share. I opt out of verbal humor in the work because, to be perfectly frank, I just don’t find that many people funny, and the corollary of this is that anything resembling verbal humor in the work is bound to be fraught with dissonance and ultimately be a frustrating means of communication. I can be a ham, and because of this I try to keep my own persona from animating the work to too great of an extent lest it confuse my intentions and signal to my audience that one tone might be more credible than another..

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Thematically, “destroyers” is a cynical reading on its subject matter, but formally it is

rooted in a genuine belief in the validity of the Extraordinary Object, described wonderfully by sculptor Richard Stankiewicz in a 1959 statement:

“The one with presence... it can no more be ignored than being stared at can. It is the ultimate realism, this presence, having nothing to do with resemblances to ‘nature.’ The peculiar posture of the convincing being, the stance of being about to move, the enormity of the immovable, the tension between the separate parts of a whole are qualities that pull us to the special object like iron to a magnet.” (Chipp 1968:576).

Similarly, the work regards its lineage not as a liability, but as something to understand in order to move forward. In addition to familiarity with the work including but not limited to the artists mentioned earlier, my visual idiom owes much to a lifetime of admiring and sometimes inventing strange creatures. . More specifically, my own visual culture stems from others’ artistic interpretations of fantasy and myth, especially in video game design. While this smacks a bit of the classic American dilemma of identifying more strongly with a brand or commodity than a cultural inheritance, the mid 80s was a strange time to be a kid. That era witnessed the beginning of an incredible explosion of imagery by virtue of electronic entertainment that only continues to grow in its scope, fed by savagely competitive markets.

In the early days, games published by Japanese companies like Nintendo and developed by hundreds of smaller firms introduced an unprecedented visual culture that was dizzily pan-ethnographic in its reference and abstracted by the limitations of technology. I played video games for about fifteen years and in that time was exposed to an incomprehensible amount of imagery from idiosyncratic, contrived worlds that plundered every realms ranging from world mythology, literature, art, architecture, folklore, to pop culture for inspiration. Case in point, many years later I ventured into the British Museum and encountered a creature of Buddhist myth, the Garuda. This, of course, was not the first time I had seen one, just the first time it was not a jumble of pixels on my television screen.

Now I feel that my work carries with it the imprint of the entertainment industry mostly by virtue of the fact that so many of the sources I have listed, traditionally the secret weapon of the contemporary artist, have been co-opted by said industry. Elitist notions about *what* constitutes credible art aside, the fact remains that the Extraordinary Object is broadly and indisputably commercially viable thanks to the Nintendos and Harry Potters of our cultural landscape. The only thing is, sculptors are getting bid out of a job. Even the most formally daring work is destined to find an analog on a CGI storyboard somewhere in the latter-day Brill Buildings of visual culture. For me, as a sculptor, this knowledge has always carried with it a mandate to seek something greater than an ideologically bankrupt product at a prohibitive price.

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Academia is classically the ideal setting for the cultivation of a greater social and civic conscience (it takes a general sense of malaise and an upper level economic anthropology class to realize the extent to which the market has co-opted this project, but that's another paper). As a body of work, "destroyers" is the most explicit in its content of any I have executed to date. Granted, I have selected a very broad subject, the recklessness and destruction of US interventionism--as easy a target as it is intractable. A nascent geopolitical conscience, however, is a huge step forward for someone emerging from this moment in academic art. What I feel is at work around me is an institutional infantilization of the art student. Cultural writer Dave Hickey: "Young artists are put in a terrible position these days, especially in graduate school... kids today end up pleasing parent figures well into their thirties"(Ostrow 1995). In vogue right now seems to be a retreat inward, a celebration of solipsism and a perpetual adolescence. How many times have I heard "the more personal the work, the more universal it become" Charming *bon mot* that it is, this advice has launched thousands of inquiries into identity politics and personal narrative under an aegis of presumably unassailable validity.

I find this problematic because the subtext of this philosophy is that the only subject

matter the artist is qualified to treat at length is his or her own self. If only the pundits of the world were this demure. The voyeur in all of us creates the audience for work about the self and will surely continue to do so, but it's unfortunate that the mental energy of the art student is directed down a path that aspires to little more than introspection and extroversion. My concern is that this autoanalytic project may have an isolating effect and may obviate, in the artist's mind, the need for a world view rooted in ideological inquiry to inform studio practice.

I seek to develop such a world view because I think it is the only way to justify the fine arts path in this time of boiling-over. Thus far, I have had to settle for moderate success in dovetailing my formal inquiries with my ideological concerns, and it was a chance perusal at the public library that set the trajectory of this long sought-after synthesis. A non-fiction graphic novel gave me the name of a benchmark title to investigate, *Killing Hope* by William Blum, and suddenly there was a way into a realm that had always both interested and intimidated me: foreign policy and geopolitical intrigue. Thus, I began to educate myself in these topics and in doing so developed a context in which certain forms and statements became credible. The texts I went on to investigate collectively became my Rosetta Stone allowing me to translate and focus an incoherent panoply of peripheral discontent into a language with which I was already familiar; indeed, the hardware and imagery of the guilty parties in the military/industrial complex had been informing my vocabulary from the start.

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